

## FACTSHEETS

# Health equity from the start - and the role of **education**

### What is health equity?

Health inequalities are commonly understood as “the systematic and avoidable differences in health outcomes between social groups such that poorer and/ or more disadvantaged people are more likely to have illnesses and disabilities and shorter lives than those who are more affluent”<sup>1</sup>.

Health inequalities are observed in all European countries and they are substantial<sup>2</sup>. For example, the difference in life expectancy between high and low socio-economic groups amounts to several years. In other words, many people who are dying prematurely each year as a result of health inequalities would otherwise have enjoyed a longer life.

Health inequalities that could be avoided by reasonable means are in general perceived as **unnecessary, avoidable, unfair** and **unjust**. Society must therefore invest to promote **health equity**.

### How do we achieve health equity?

To a large part, health results from **social determinants**. These are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. They include social and community networks, living and working conditions, and the health system. These conditions are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels, which are themselves influenced by policy choices.

Obviously, the health system alone cannot promote health equity. Action is needed across different sectors at different levels. Health ministries have a vital role to play both in ensuring the contribution of the health system, and in advocating for health equity in the development plans, policies and actions of players in other sectors.

### Why health equity from the start?

The **early years are a key determinant of health**. Giving every child the best start in life is crucial to reducing health inequalities across the life course, and other social and economic inequalities throughout life. The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are laid in early childhood.

What happens during these early years has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and well-being – from obesity, heart disease and mental health, to educational achievement and economic status<sup>3</sup>.

In order to promote health equity from the start, the EC **Joint Action on Health Inequalities** project aims to initiate and strengthen cooperation of stakeholders from sectors such as health, education, social welfare and the built environment.

This paper highlights some key findings and makes recommendations for the area of education.

### Why is education important for health equity?

A large and persistent association between education and health has been documented in many countries and for a wide variety of health measures. It can be concluded that well educated people live longer, have better health, and are more likely to have a health-promoting lifestyle and to make use of health offers such as prevention or rehabilitation. In this context, childhood and adolescence are critical periods. It is at this time that attitudes and lifestyles are shaped and the foundations for adult health are laid.

#### Evidence

The European HBSC (Health Behaviour in School Children) Study has investigated the association between school type and regular tobacco consumption. Results for Germany show that the prevalence of smoking among children attending the 'Hauptschule' (general secondary school) is three times higher than that of their peers of the same age attending the 'Gymnasium' (secondary school for those studying to go on to university) (22% v. 7%)<sup>4</sup>.

Smoking is an important risk factor for health and is more prevalent among those children and adolescents who have not had a high level of formal education. This kind of association is also seen among adults and it has been replicated in many studies.

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School experiences occurring during crucial developmental periods in young people's lives also influence the development of their self-esteem, self-perceptions and health behaviours, with consequent effects on their future health and life satisfaction. Schools can have a positive effect on children's health and well-being through the creation of positive developmental experiences. This may be particularly important for marginalised children.

### How can education contribute to health equity?

This sector can contribute in many ways to promoting health equity from the start. The following suggestions are not exhaustive, but can be used to stimulate discussion<sup>5</sup>.

- ➔ To achieve equity from the start, **investment in the early years** is crucial. This requires a sustained commitment to children and young people through continued family support, education, training and employment. Attempts to promote skills and qualifications should involve collaborative work involving schools, families and communities.
- ➔ Governments need to provide quality education that pays attention to children's physical, social/emotional, and language/cognitive development, starting in pre-school. Areas to be addressed in strategy development include: levels of funding, infrastructure (including buildings and facilities), support for children with special educational needs, ratio of staff to children, recruitment, support and training of pre-school staff, and the nature of the pre-school programme.
- ➔ Integrating social and emotional learning in curricula in **primary and secondary schools**, as well as paying attention to the children's physical and cognitive/ language development, can improve school attendance and educational attainment and could potentially result in long-term gains for health.
- ➔ Social and emotional learning comes under the broad umbrella of **life-skills education**. Life-skills education is a way of supporting healthy behaviours and empowering young people to take control of their lives. It responds to learners' needs and is committed to gender equity.
- ➔ UNICEF has developed a framework for **child-friendly schools** that takes a rights-based approach to education. Child-friendly schools create a safe, healthy, gender-sensitive learning environment, with parent and community involvement, and provide quality education and life skills. This model, or similar models, have now been developed or are being developed in more than 90 countries, and have been adopted as a national quality standard in 54 countries.
- ➔ Overall, governments should: provide quality **compulsory primary and secondary education** for all boys and girls, regardless of ability to pay; identify and address the barriers to girls and boys enrolling in and staying at school; and abolish user fees for primary school.

### The EC-funded Equity Action project

Joint Action on Health Inequalities (Equity Action) is the EC joint action project on health inequalities. It is designed to help turn the ambitions of *Solidarity in Health*, the EC communication on reducing health inequalities, into reality, by raising awareness, promoting the exchange of information and knowledge, identifying and sharing good practice, and facilitating the design of tailor-made policies. There are four main work packages (WPs):

- **Tools (WP4)** - building capability and improving policy at member-state and EU level, focusing on health impact assessment and health inequality strategies
- **Regions (WP5)** - identifying and supporting regional approaches to address health inequalities, including influencing EU structural fund programmes that start in 2014
- **Knowledge (WP6)** - engaging scientific experts to develop a European research agenda on the effectiveness of inter-sectoral action to support policymakers
- **Stakeholders (WP7)** - developing lessons for building alliances and networks with key stakeholders at member-state and EU level, to promote and embed the social determinants of health agenda.

The project runs from 2011 to 2014 and involves 24 partners from 16 member states.

To find out more about us, visit the Equity Action website [www.equityaction-project.eu](http://www.equityaction-project.eu).

### REFERENCES

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